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ABSTRACT

This digest provides useful information on starting an elementary school foreign language (FLES) program. Individual sections address the following: (1) cautions in planning a FLES program; (2) initiating the planning process; (3) designing the program, with special attention given to scheduling and language choice; (4) programs that lead to high levels of language fluency; and (5) determining program feasibility. (Contains 10 references.) (VWL)

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Digest

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Guidelines for Starting an Elementary School Foreign Language Program

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In the past decade, schools have demonstrated increased interest in beginning the study of foreign languages in the early grades. Influencing this trend are a number of national reports urging that the study of languages other than English begin early (Met & Rhodes, 1990). Another influence on the trend toward an early start is research that indicates that the early study of a second language results in cognitive benefits, gains in academic achievement, and positive attitudes toward diversity (Rosenbusch, 1995).

Perhaps the most important influence on early foreign language study will come from the national initiative, Goals 2000. In this initiative, foreign languages are designated as part of the core curriculum, together with traditional subject areas such as math, science, and social studies. As part of this initiative, the foreign language profession has developed national standards for foreign language programs beginning in kindergarten and continuing through 12th grade. Although these standards are not mandatory, they are certain to increase even further the interest in starting foreign language study in the early grades (Phillips & Draper, 1994).

Cautions in Planning a Program

Schools that are planning new elementary school foreign language programs need to be well informed about the factors that led to the disappearance of the popular elementary school foreign language programs of the 1950s and 1960s, because these factors continue to be a challenge to program viability today (Heining-Boynton, 1990; Lipton 1992). Such factors include the following:

- Lack of teachers with sufficient language skills and qualifications to teach a foreign language to young students.
- Programs inadequate in design and without the necessary funding.
- Inappropriate or unrealistic program goals.
- Lack of coordination and articulation across levels of instruction.
- Inappropriate teaching methodologies for young students.
- Inadequate and insufficient instructional materials.
- Lack of evaluation procedures for students, teachers, and the program.

Initiating the Planning Process

When a school has made the decision to explore the implementation of an elementary school foreign language program, the first step is to identify a steering committee to lead the process. This committee should include representatives of all those who have a stake in the implementation of a program: parents, foreign language teachers, classroom teachers and school administrators from both the elementary and secondary schools, district administrators, and business and community members. The steering committee must complete the following tasks:

- Research the rationale for an early start to the study of a foreign language in order to clarify the reasons for implementing an elementary school program.

- Examine the advantages and limitations of each program model by reading the professional literature (including results of research studies), consulting with language professionals, and visiting existing programs.

- Explore elementary school foreign language curricula and teaching strategies to define the nature of current foreign language instruction at the elementary school level.

- Explore models for articulating the foreign language program across levels (elementary, middle school, high school) to provide for an uninterrupted sequence of instruction that will result in higher levels of fluency in the language.

- Evaluate the school district's existing foreign language program so that future plans can build on current program strengths.

- Inform teachers and administrators, parents, and the community about the rationale for elementary school foreign language programs, strategies of teaching foreign languages at this level, program models and outcomes, and articulation models.

- Explore school, parent, business, and community support for an elementary school foreign language program.

- Determine the most promising program model(s) for the local situation through discussion of the philosophy of the foreign language program and the desired program outcomes (Rosenbusch, 1991).

Designing the Program

Several components of the structure of the elementary school foreign language program must be considered with special care. These include: scheduling, curriculum design, instructional materials, staffing, multiple entry points, stu-

dent accessibility, language choice, and program articulation, coordination, and evaluation (Curtain & Pesola, 1994; Met, 1985; Met, 1989; Rosenbusch, 1991). After researching the literature and through inquiry during school visitations, the steering committee should discuss each concern in depth before finalizing its recommendations.

Information about each of the program components can be found in the references listed at the end of this paper. A key reference that will be extremely useful to the committee is *Languages and Children: Making the Match* (Curtain & Pesola, 1994). Two of the most challenging aspects are discussed briefly here.

Scheduling. The minimum amount of time recommended for an elementary school foreign language class is 75 minutes per week, with classes meeting at least every other day (Rosenbusch, 1992). Met and Rhodes (1990) suggest that "foreign language instruction should be scheduled daily, and for no less than 30 minutes" (p. 438) to provide periods that are long enough for activities that are motivating to the students and to prevent teacher burnout.

Language Choice. Determining which languages will be taught is potentially the most controversial issue in program design (Met, 1989). Some experts recommend that this decision be the last one made in order to keep the issue from becoming divisive. As the decision is made, the following considerations should be kept in mind: teacher availability, program organization and scheduling, maintenance of established upper level language programs, and language diversity (Curtain & Pesola, 1994).

Programs that Lead to High Levels of Fluency

If the steering committee determines that the central goal of the district's program is that students attain a high level of fluency in the foreign language, the committee will choose the earliest possible start for the study of the language, maximize the time and intensity of the program at every level, and provide an articulated program that flows across levels without interruption. Students will be able to continue their study of the language throughout every level and will have the opportunity to add a second language or change languages at the beginning of middle or high school. All students will study a foreign language "regardless of learning style, achievement level, race/ethnic origin, socioeconomic status, home language, or future academic goals" (Met & Rhodes, 1990, p. 438). The teachers involved in the program at all levels will have excellent language skills, be well informed about current teaching strategies, and work together as a team to provide a carefully developed, articulated curriculum.

Determining Program Feasibility

The steering committee should examine the feasibility of the most promising program model(s) for the local situation with the help of school administrators who determine budget, scheduling, and space usage, and who make personnel decisions. Based on their previous study and the feasibility information, the steering committee will determine what recommendation it will make to school administrators and the school board concerning the start-up of an elementary school foreign language program (Rosenbusch, 1991). This final decision may be a difficult one to make. If the district is not willing to make a serious commitment to developing a strong foreign language program, the steering committee must be ready to recommend that no elementary school program be established at the present time. Experience demonstrates that it is difficult to change a weak program design for a strong one once a program has been established. A weak program design will not allow students to develop high levels of proficiency in the language.

If adequate support for a program is lacking, effort may be better spent in solving the problems that prevent the establishment of a quality program and in working to build support by educating the community about the nature and value of strong foreign language programs. Met and Rhodes (1990) clarify that "a primary goal in the next decade is to work actively to increase the number of high-quality, carefully designed elementary-school foreign language programs based on strong administrative, parental, and community support" (p. 438). The implementation of elementary school foreign language programs of excellence is critical to the development of the foreign language proficiency skills our nation's students will need in the future.

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